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Action Research as Foresight Methodology

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Anticipatory action learning is emerging as a new approach to foresight, indeed as its most recent epistemological advance. The background of this new synthesis is explored, looking at how action research and futures studies interact dynamically from eight angles: participation, social change, knowledge creation, systems thinking, complexity, futures visions, democratic commitments and social innovation - and examining some implication for both fields.

Keywords: action research, futures studies, methodology, anticipatory action learning

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This paper explores key concepts within the fields of Action Research and Future Studies, and how these interact in dynamic ways. I argue that the two fields are not only complementary to each other, but are mutually integral aspects of a larger whole. While this larger whole is still emerging, we can tentatively say that the two fields are a powerful combination. Further, I argue that action research should be considered integral to futures studies, and visa-versa, both as process and content.

I have found eight angles where both disciplines interact in meaningful and dynamic ways. Through-out this paper I will explore these angles and their implications:

1. *Participation*
2. *Social change*
3. *Knowledge creation*
4. *Systems thinking*
5. *Complexity*
6. *Futures visions*
7. *Democratic commitments*
8. *Social innovation*

From Local to Global

Depending on the perspective, either field could be considered auxiliary to the other. To the action researcher, who laboriously spends his or her hours working within the local contexts of communities or organizations to co-generate meaningful research, and who's theories are hardened on the anvil of creating meaningful social change, futures studies might seem the discipline the most peripheral to his interests, and the most ill equipped to deal with the local and intimate domain of community existence. To the futurist, who laboriously spends his or her hours understanding the nuances of history and social change, who through persistent work begins to make sense of the weak signals and the subtle shifts, action research would seem as simply an auxiliary field, inappropriate for understanding the greater scheme. However, I invite the reader, whether they belong to one camp or the other, to let go of their respective discipline, and to see both belonging to each other.

Futures studies is a growing field with a long tradition of powerful and beneficial inquiry. It has diversified through its trans-disciplinary embrace of such fields as systems thinking, education, hermeneutics, macro-history, sociology, management, ecology, literature, ethics, philosophy,

planning and others. It is now a complexly integrated field with many lines of inquiry woven together into a dynamic, if paradoxical, whole. Although there are many unresolved issues within the discipline, futures studies is now in widespread use in numerous areas.

Action Research is a line of scholarship stemming from sociology, rural development and industrial relations, among other domains. Like futures studies, it also is a young, yet growing discipline. It is a discipline that formulates social action for social research, and social research for social action. In the language of Davydd Greenwood (1998: 4):

Action Research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking too improve their situation. AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.

Together, the professional researcher and the stakeholders define the problem to be examined, co-generate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned.¹

What makes action research relevant to futures studies is what I believe to be convergence between both disciplines in numerous ways that, if explored, could be potentially beneficial to both disciplines. The result, I feel, is a difficult to articulate marriage, an aspect of an emergent transdisciplinary domain, a synthesis of local community and global community research and activity.

Participation

One of the key concepts in action research is participation. The meaning of this word has been given much attention in this field, and there is a particular branch of action research, participatory action research, that makes participation its central tenet. William Foote Whyte (1943) pioneered participatory action research in the 1940's in his work with the poor living in American slums.² He advanced creating knowledge about a community through an intimate understanding of a community's motivational social structures and actions. He (Whyte 1943) rejected the separation between the researcher and the researched, and created a setting in which research was conducted by participants and for participants, and

where the researcher is not an outside agent manipulating change, but someone working with people from within a community or organisation to create change together.³ Thus, participation is so central to this practice that social research knowledge generated without the inclusion of the subject might be seen as both ethically problematic and scientifically invalid. Yoland Wadsworth (1998) has defined PAR thus as:

- more *conscious of "problematizing"* an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematising it and why we are problematising it;
- more *explicit about "naming" the problem*, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it;
- more *planned and deliberate* about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more *systematic and rigorous* in our efforts to get answers;
- more *carefully documenting and recording action* and what people think about it and in more detail and in ways which are accessible to other relevant parties;
- more *intensive and comprehensive* in our study, waiting much longer before we "jump" to a conclusion;
- more *self-sceptical* in checking our hunches;
- attempting to develop *deeper understandings* and *more useful and more powerful theory* about the matters we are researching, in order to produce new knowledge which can inform improved action or practice; and
- *changing our actions* as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions.⁴

It can be said that there exists a great difference in approach to creating meaningful action between the two approaches in these respective fields: strategic planning (traditionally used and taught in futures studies) vs. co-generative action (a process used in action research). Strategic planning is a process, within futures studies and borrowed from business, that is normally used within upper management circles who have command and control power to steer the direction of an organization. At its best it combines sensitivity to an organizations future environment with sensitivity to an organizations internal values/mission/capacity, translates this into visionary directives, and implements these through intelligent plan-

ning and action taking. It stems from the mountain top view of environmental change and internal operations, and thus usually is conducted from the top down, by a management elite and consultants.

Strategic planning has also often been criticized for the inflexibility of the plans created, and the micro-managed details of implementation that are formulated through rigorous gap analysis (Minzberg 1994).⁵ The process has even been said to alienate the people who have created the strategic intent in the first place through over-professionalized jargon and technical superiority on the part of professional planners, where people have subsequently felt themselves slaves to the plans they sponsored. The result has normally been a trickle down approach to foresight and implementation, where upper management discovers strategic directives, and implements them through strict planning and disciplined action. The futurist, in the "I will tell you what the future holds" sense, whether at the national or organizational level, has normally facilitated this trickle down situation by being a consultant for those in positions of power.

While this kind of approach is certainly useful and necessary in many situations, as organizations and even nations must sometimes make radical changes based on perceived threats and opportunities, action research differs dramatically in its approach to change. One of the primary commitments within action research is to co-generate learning, and by doing this facilitate capacity building. In action research the research process is open to all and facilitated to promote fairness, outcomes should support participants interests so that the knowledge created helps them control their own destiny (Greenwood & Levin 1998: 112).⁶ Actions should be generated by the participants themselves, ensuring a maximum amount of self-determination. Finally, the action researcher, through the process of capacity building, becomes redundant (Greenwood & Levin 1998:118):

The outsider (action researcher) gradually lets go control so that the insider can learn how to control and guild their own development process.⁷

There are, however, many examples of capacity building in futures studies. Educational futures studies has made this a primary consideration. This strategy aims at making foresight a social capacity, through making foresight an individual capacity developed through one's educational experience, by futures studies making its way into educational curriculums and university programs. This kind of institutionalisation aims to make the basic knowledge and skills within futures studies a commonality, to enable the average individual's claim to self, communal, and social

determination. Still, the teacher/student relationship typical of most pedagogy is quite different from the co-generative dialogue required in action research. The conflict in approach to education is acute (Elden & Levin 1991:134):

*The knowledge generating process should proceed under local control. A teacher controlled dialogue would never create new local theories based on participants' gradually improved theory creating competence.*⁸

Multicultural futures takes into account the epistemic assumptions, cultural expectations and civilisational worldviews in the pedagogy of creating foresight. Inayatullah (2002) argues that to be effective, the futurist must be willing to play both roles responsibly, at certain points leading by listening (facilitation), at others leading by teaching (traditional "sage on stage"), and at others times other approaches.⁹

The implications of this for futures studies is a re-orientation in how to involve many people in a foresight process in meaningful ways. It can allow futures studies to be something meaningfully participated in by many people, something it has struggled to do. It can also be a way of creating capacity for foresight at the grass roots, at the organisational and community domain, and ultimately the social sphere. For action research it may mean strategic facilitation, participation with a forward view.

Social Change

One of the more rigorous aspects of futures studies is its investigation of change theories, either through sociology, macro-history, cultural anthropology and other. The diversity of theories is staggering. Every year new theories are "unearthed" through the work of cultural anthropologists and macro-historians. The level of complexity within the change discourse that futurists attain make them adept at sense-making and communicating this change to others. This is clearly one of the areas in which the field excels. However, these theories often only explain change, and many futurists have shied away from creating change, or exploring social change agency. I feel, there should exist a dual aspect in the discourse on social change. Knowledge of structure could be balanced with practice in agency. While an understanding of change, why and how it happens, is critical; why and how to make change happen in the real world, agency, is equally important, indeed life affirming. It is in this second aspect of so-

cial change where action research is involved, working within communities or organizations to bring about meaningful results, and deriving useful knowledge from this experience for participants.

One example of a theory for social change agency coming from outside academia, is The Social Movement Empowerment Project in San Francisco. This is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting progressive social movements. The Movement Action Plan, written by Bill Moyer, outlines eight stages of successful social movements. Moyer has claimed that many activists have benefited from his lectures and framework because they have needed a roadmap that helps them to situate themselves in the change agency process, and to understand clear steps which might help them to reach their objectives. An example of an intuitive action learner, Bill Moyer (1987) built his framework from many years working in building social movements, but also utilizing elements from social theory, finally culminating in a "local theory," one derived from the participants and for the use of the participants (activists).¹⁰

Futurists tend to focus on the larger scale, and action research tends to focus on the smaller and immediate organisation or community. Macro-history analyses change within a time scale of 1000 years or more in some theories. Environmental scanning, a common foresight method, respects the diversity of global phenomenon. Multicultuaral futures looks from the vantage point of civilisational ways of knowing. All these are examples of a macro-historical/planetological/civilisational approach, culminating in courses and books on global futures.

Action researchers might feel they have little use for time scales of 1000 years if their goal is to create meaningful change in a community in 1-5 years time. Action researchers need to know more about a local culture, how innovations are diffused there, the intricacies of the local power structure, and other concepts that would help them to help locals better their situation. From an action research point of view, futures studies might seem too passive, overly speculative, or simply too grand a scale to be applied to action research.

I would argue that these two approaches complement each other. Action research excels at understanding agency within local contexts, while futures studies excels at understanding structure within global contexts. The integration of both would benefit both. Translating global insight, the forte of futures studies, into local action, the forte of action research, would seem to be a promising challenge. Social change as structure and agency are integral to each other: foresight without action is meaningless, and action without foresight can be dangerous. Intelligence in frameworks

of change would lead to better creative responses, as an understanding of macro-history and theories in social change might help the action researchers situate themselves, and the community and organization they are working with in intelligent ways, leading to possibilities for action previously ignored. Seeing grand patterns within history might allow for greater understanding of local dilemmas that might otherwise be considered eternal facts of life or unsolvable conundrums. Anticipation may lead to moral imperatives, and at this point the baton may be passed to another practice or a different framework which knows the path(s) and is prepared to walk them. In short action research can be a way of applying foresight toward the aim of meaningful social change, while futures studies can be a way for action research to connect its project to the global and temporal in meaningful ways.

Knowledge Creation

There are interesting developments in how the concept of scientific knowledge is evolving within these two fields. Some practitioners of action research claim that they are more capable of producing valid socially scientific knowledge than the conventional social sciences. Social scientists have tried repeatedly to sever the relationship with the subject, in the hope that sociological work can live within the objective orthodoxy of science. Some action researchers point out, however, that action research is much closer to a true scientific method than traditional social science in its knowledge creation process. The iterative cycle of experimentation and hypothesis, action and thought, that defines the natural science's process of validating or invalidating stated claims is an integral aspect of disciplines such as biology and physics, and also followed by action research, but has been all but ignored by conventional social science. Greenwood writes (1998):¹¹

...conventional social scientist's disengagement from the phenomenon they study is virtually complete. Equating this disengagement with objectivity, impartiality, and the requirements of scientific practice, these practitioners systematically distance themselves from their objects. Then, by separating science and action, they sever the connection between thought and action that permits the testing of results in the physical and biological sciences and in AR.

In futures studies the issue of scientific validation has always been problematic. This led some in the field to offer the ability to predict the future as a solution, allowing some to assert that stated claims about the future that have come true must have a science to them. In the end, forecasting was eclipsed by scenario building, as the concept of a predictable future began to seem philosophically naive to many. The exploration of the potentialities of an open dynamic system through the study of emerging issues, scenario building, and acknowledgement of human will and action as critical determinants has distanced futures studies from what many social scientists consider scientific. However, futures studies today makes no more apologies about its scientific-ness. Some have taken the moral ground, claiming that it is a moral imperative of humans to exercise anticipation and responsibility taking for the consequences of our actions and in-actions. Others have formulated the meaning of valid knowledge in new ways, for example Critical Realism, which address the propositional nature of all claims, and the necessary arguability of what is deemed real living beyond subjectivity (Bell 1997).¹² Slaughter has argued for the symbolic nature of the future as a cognitive social construction - a representation.

One parallel in both fields in regard to scientific validity, I believe, is to be seen in Richard Slaughter's use of Ken Wilber's and Mark Edward's re-conceptualization of the creation of scientific knowledge. The integral cycle, originated from Ken Wilber's integral agenda, further modified by Mark Edwards, and finally applied to futures studies by Richard Slaughter, brings together four hemispheres of knowledge into a total scheme of knowledge creation and verification. Slaughter explains how knowledge can be seen to be created in four major steps. First there is an objective behavioral "injunctive strand" in which a futures methodology is selected and applied. Second is the subjective intentional "intuitive strand" in which the result of the work is assembled. Third a subjective and cultural "interpretive strand" in which the results of the study are subject to thorough interpretation. Finally, within the objective social "validative strand" the results are confirmed or rejected within a public social platform. Within this framework, creating knowledge in futures studies is simply one example of a much larger process happening in many disciplines in forms adapted to the discipline at hand. Action research can also be seen to live within this larger framework, as its iterative cycle of action and reflection is clearly consistent with Mark Edward's conceptualization of knowledge creation.

The key difference between the two approaches of futures studies (within Slaughter's framework) and action research (within Greenwood's framework) in regards to knowledge creation is that action research demands that propositions of a social nature be verified by creating real change in a given local context, while futures studies demands that propositions of a "forward view" be verified through interpretation and judgement within a given local/global context (the community of foresight) (Slaughter 1999).¹³

However, the parallels in the two approaches are significant. They both move through iterative cycles of action and reflection. They both rely on explicit methodology which is well documented. They both seek confirmation within a communal context. Both approaches consider valid and relevant knowledge to live within defined local contexts, as opposed to over-generalized propositions of the universal category of knowledge. Finally, Slaughter (1999) considers the forward view as a basis for meaningful social action, a clear parallel to action research's commitment to social research through social action.¹⁴

In general, action research can offer futures studies a way of testing the applicability and validity of foresight knowledge within local contexts. As futures studies is a field with many theories and frameworks, Argyris' gap between "espoused theory" and "theory in use" could be analysed to find out how far apart they are and how to bridge the divide (Action Science Network 2002).¹⁵ In relation to local stakeholders, "knowledge about the future" should not be an abstract concept lacking relevance, but something that has real value to a group. In contrast, futures studies offers action research a way of situating its knowledge creating community in the local context as a product and producer of history, moving beyond universalist/positivist criteria, and with a community's new knowledge as the basis for further knowledge development and social action in successive historical iterations.

Systems Thinking

Both fields, while not necessarily stemming from systems thinking, have come to rely heavily on it. Whether using the soft-systems approach of Peter Checkland, or the hard systems approach of J. Forrester, futurists have more and more relied on systems thinking to understand complex and counter-intuitive change processes, and to model these in order to make some of the assumptions within these systems explicit. In futures

studies, systems modeling has almost become a pre-requisite in some circles for constructing scenarios. Playing with the assumptions within a given model, or seeing how given systems react to various emerging issues, trends, etc. is now a common technique employed in creating alternative futures. The Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* is an example of this.

In action research people and artifacts are seen to be inter-linked within an ecology of complex systems. These social systems have a history and are in constant motion, evolving through time. Humans are situated in these social systems, and these social systems influence human behavior and are influenced by human behavior. In this way, action research relies on a holistic view of the world (Greenwood & Levin 1998).¹⁶ This is a stark contrast to orthodox social science, which still is founded on social facts that stand on their own, and have claims to general universality.

In addition to understanding social reality as a systemic phenomenon, action research has moved toward systemic intervention, influence at a systemic level, aimed at re-creating and designing social life at the level of deep ecology. In a different turn Greenwood (1998) articulates a systems agenda for AR:

*AR can be understood as an effort to transform society into ever more open systems.*¹⁷

Action research's appreciation of systems offers futures studies local sensitivity to global phenomena. It would allow futures studies to relate in more detail the implications and consequence of global systems to local ones. Reciprocally, futures studies allows systemic intervention (via AR) at a local level more sensitivity to global systems. Both would allow for the testing of the relevance and validity of global models to local models, and iterative re-definitions of each.

Complexity

In both action research and futures studies the balance between mystery and mastery, a grounded relationship with the unknowable, is very important - with action research not knowing the road and not being prescriptive about a particular way, yet being a navigator that empowers people to take meaningful steps in desired directions (Flood 2001: 144)¹⁸ - and with futures studies not knowing the future or predicting the future, yet creating a meaningful representation of future(s) that leads people to meaningful activity.

Concepts in complexity have also filtered into the language and thought of both fields. Complexity theory has become a popular paradigm in which to work in some foresight institutions around the world; at the Budapest Futures Studies Centre in Hungary, Curtin University in Australia, the University of Houston Clear-Lake in Texas, the Australian Foresight Institute and at the University of Sunshine Coast in Australia, for example, employ or have employed complexity theory in foresight work in various manners. In the development of futures studies, the emphasis on prediction and forecasting, which understood the future to be a fact, slowly shifted toward an emphasis on scenario building, which understood the future to be something interpretive and evolving. This acknowledged that variables involved in understanding change are staggering as to make absolute certainty impossible. With human intention and action influencing "the future," any kind of mastery over knowing change or creating change seems ridiculous. In contrast to the complex adaptive systems discourse, Inayatullah (2002) defines complexity to be reflexivity regarding our own perceptions, in order to get some peripheral vision, depth and altitude, "horizontal and vertical," exploring ways of knowing and epistemological space:

Complexity requires accepting that there are many factors that explain change and that there will always be some unknown factors, partly because our knowing efforts are complicit in that which we desire to know. Complexity also assumes that the novel may emerge in our research. Our research findings thus must be open ended, ready to be discarded if a new paradigm provides more elegant, informative, explanatory insights.¹⁹

Flood (2001: 144) writes that action research is a balance between mystery and mastery. Because the complexity and vastness of the variables that envelop our lives is boundless and beyond our capacity for comprehension, it leads us to an appreciation of the unknowable:

The human mind is both the creator and subject of complexity, not an externally appointed master over it and all its parts. That is why it makes no sense to separate action from research in our minds or in our practice.²⁰

In both domains the quest for absolute knowledge is ending, and with this the positivists dream of mastery over nature. In place of this is an appreciation for the infinite complexity we are part of, and a desire to

understand these changes. It is not the hubris of triumphalism or the humble oblivion of the agnostic, but a balance between the two which allows a “forward view” to be a call to meaningful action. This is also reminiscent of Chris Argyris’ double loop learning, in which operationalised learning become a trap for organizations, where fixed rules of “theory-in-action” work to stifle a groups effectiveness, and where true learning is in personal open-ness in exploring assumptions embedded in our actions and re-orienting ourselves for new actions in a dynamic learning environment, the novel emerging out of the grappling with deep inter-subjective complexity (Action Science Network).²¹

An appreciation of complexity at the local level means that, despite futures studies understanding of global complexity, it still must “dance” with local complexity, the unexpected and novel emerging. It also implies a sense of mystery, and thus open-ness and humility on the part of futures studies to acknowledge the limits of its own knowledge in dealing with organisations and communities. It preserves needed mystery in how the local and global inter-relate.

Futures Visions

Futures studies for many years now has made a science of studying visions of the future. These might include provocative images, ideal images and images of probable futures. Within this the visioning process, how a vision of the future is created, has also been of central concern. The context necessary for a vision to occur, what the content of a vision should be, and how to develop organizational vision, among others, have been primary questions (Shultz 1995).²² Creative, intelligent and visionary responses to change have been examined in the field from the very beginnings of futures studies.

There are parallels to this in some action research practise. Appreciative Inquiry in particular is a methodology that leads to group visioning of preferred futures and actions toward the particular future state envisioned. The process begins by appreciating the best of what is in the community or organization, the “discovery” phase. The process then takes participants to envisioning the best of what could be, the “dreams” phase. The participants then co-design this image of the future in more detail, asking “what should be,” the “design” phase. Finally, appreciative inquiry asks and invites a wider range of participation to sustain “what will be,” the “destiny” phase, supporting innovation and action.

While there are other examples of visioning in action research, visions of the future would seem to be an outcome of collaborative inquiry, not a central concern in itself as in futures studies. Action research thinking such as in Peter Senge's inter-systemic collaborative models in *The Fifth Discipline*, has been adopted wholesale by some futures researchers, as the clearest example of creating organisational vision with real relevance and effectiveness. In this example, collaborative inquiry centers around an organisation's direction, and this vision becomes animating because it is co-generated, ownership in the vision becomes natural for individuals. As intelligence in this type of organisation is distributed, it has spontaneous adaptive characteristics that makes its future seeking/futures relevance capacity better than command/control style organisations.

Thus, in terms of visioning, the relevance of action research to futures studies is in opening a visioning process to many stakeholders in an authentic way, and of making pie in the sky visions grounded in local context and action. It also means that visioning is an iterative process that can never be locked-in in the way traditional strategic plans are. A vision is only as good as it is fresh, that is, meaningful and relevant to local stakeholders, and macro-environmental shifts from day to day. As successive iterations in an action research process unfold, and actions such as scanning, path-making, and designing redefine what is known, a vision is certain to change to become more personally meaningful, and socially relevant. Action research's concern for creating meaningful social change can be assisted by futures studies' expertise in the visioning process and images of the future - an animating group vision is essential to organisational development, and, for a particular future to be created for a community, it may first need to be imagined.²³

Democratic Commitments

Both futures studies and action research have articulated commitments to "democracy," although by different definitions and through different means. In futures parlance this is called democratising the future. This refers to a commitment to having all people, even those of low or ordinary ranking stature in society, be able to have a voice in their society's futures. This is a central concern for educational futurists who see the teaching of futures as a primary means of creating futures literacy, an understanding of conceptual tools that allows us to be critical with images of the future that may be manipulative, corrupting or unhealthy, and to

articulate intelligent alternatives. From the critical educational futures studies standpoint, empowering the children of today to take responsibility for their futures is seen to be a key to a sustainable future and a healthy society.

Wendell Bell writes that one of the primary aims of futures studies is the democratisation of the future, giving people outside of the normal decision making loop the power to make decisions, and encouraging common people to participate in a dialogue that for many years they have been alienated from. This project has been undertaken in a number of ways: through creating environmental scanning functions like WorldWatch, so that all people can know the changes that are taking place, through civil liberties agencies that hold power-brokers to account; grass-roots visioning exercises that give people hope and power to take action on issues that are of common interest, futures in education which seeks to give students the intelligence, courage and power to respond to social problems and complex changes that most people will not deal with or are resigned about; and the development of (sometimes grassroots sometimes special interest) scenarios of the future that are alternatives to existing images of the future used by power-brokers for political control.

Action research also seeks to create new forms of interaction that distribute power more evenly. This cannot be done without an understanding of social systems as integrated wholes, and an analysis of existing power-structures. Paolo Freire (1972) was one of the first to articulate a systematic analysis of systems of power particularly through collaborative inquiry, and make human freedom a central goal in this co-inquiry.²⁴ Greenwood (1998) also identifies this as a major action research agenda:

*AR explicitly seeks to disrupt existing power relationships for the purpose of democratizing society.*²⁵

Because of this action research is often critical of the existing political economy, and the academic structures that accompany this. It often sees the separation of science from reform (social change) as a form of counter-revolutionary power-holding, with the creation of “subject” and “object” as an example of a bureaucratization of society that leads to more stratified social hierarchies.

In contrast to this, action research seeks democratic inclusion and social research which “democratizes research processes through the inclusion of local stakeholders as co-researchers...” (Greenwood & Levin 1998).²⁶ There

is no "subject," but a partner in research. Academic researchers, because of years of training in "sense making" and creating frameworks, usually create "model monopolies" (Elden & Levin 1991: 135)²⁷ where the intellectual frameworks/models that researchers create envelop and overpower local stakeholders. But in action research, the researcher's obligation is to combine their action research frameworks with the local stakeholder's understanding of local context into a third "local theory" that emerges from the co-research. Out of this process local stakeholders learn how to conduct action research on their own, furthering their own empowerment and a democratization of the research/action process (Elden & Levin 1991: 135).²⁸ Transcending this "model monopoly" would seem to be a challenge in futures studies, a field addicted to models and frameworks for explaining the world. Gustavsen formulated a nine point criteria based in the philosophical thinking of Habermas that would lead toward democratic practice (Elden & Levin 1991: 136):

1. *The Dialogue is a process of exchange: points and arguments move to and fro between participants.*
2. *All concerned must have the possibility to participate.*
3. *Possibilities for participation are, however, not enough: Everybody should also be active in the discourse.*
4. *As a point of departure, all participants are equal.*
5. *Work experience is the foundation for participation.*
6. *At least some of the experience which each participant has when he or she enters the dialogue must be considered legitimate.*
7. *It must be possible for everyone to develop an understanding of the issue at stake.*
8. *All arguments which pertain to issues under discussion are - as a point of departure - legitimate.*
9. *The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide a platform for investigation and practical action.*²⁹

Part of the project of democratising the future, and opening up avenues for alternative futures and social innovation, is to problematise existing claims about the future, or certain images of the future. This can come in the form of deconstruction, as in Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis, or interpretation, as in Slaughter's forward view (2000).³⁰ Slaughter (1999) uses Habermas' classification of knowledge in this way.³¹ The three categories of knowledge are instrumental, practical and emancipatory (Slaughter 1999):

- a. Instrumental - what is a future oriented problem, and how can we solve it?*
- b. Practical - how can we achieve communication and understanding regarding the future(s)?*
- c. Emancipatory - how has our future(s) been colonized, communication systematically distorted and how can we liberate ourselves?³²*

Critical futures studies is clearly within this last category, investigating powerstructures and the images and literature of the future and past that uphold and protect these power structures and vested interests. Critical futures studies is clearly a challenge to the distortion of meaning within society, seeking to be an agent for human emancipation.

Applied to action research this categorisation might read (Kemmis 2001):

- d. Instrumental - what is a particular problem we have as a community or organization, and how can we solve it?*
- e. Practical - how can we evaluate our own work as Action Researchers, and see and understand ourselves in context, so that our practise is transformed for the better?*
- f. Emancipatory - how can we critique our social or educational work settings so that we may "connect the personal and the political in collaborative research and action aimed at transforming situation to overcome felt dissatisfactions, alienation, ideological distortion, and the injustices of oppression and domination."^{33,34}*

Total Systems Intervention (TSI), or (Local Systemic AR), is a branch of action research that uses a systems thinking approach (Flood 2001).³⁵ Despite coming from a different epistemological framework, it has many parallels to critical futures studies which I will briefly go into. TSI acknowledges the failure of systems dynamics to deal with many layers of systems within a given local context all at once, and uses a principle of complementarity to demonstrate "a commitment to critical awareness and social awareness by continually raising the question, which methodologies should be used, when, and why?" Four categories of organizational life are described:

- 1. Systems of Processes - concerned with efficiency and reliability*

2. *Systems of Structures* - concerned with functions, organization, coordination and control
3. *Systems of Meaning* - concerned with the meaning of improvement strategies
4. *Systems of Knowledge-power* - concerned with fairness in terms of entrenched patterns of behavior

Any one of these four “systems” might become subjects of action research (Flood 2001:141):

*The outcome is a liberating praxis that takes into account many aspects of human emancipation. ...People are less confined if actions in which they are involved are efficient rather than inefficient, and effective rather than ineffective. People are freer if actions that involve them are experienced as meaningful. And people are liberated if forces of knowledge-power are transformed, making for a fairer existence for them.*³⁶

The last two categories in this description resonate the strongest with critical futures studies, which examines and critiques “systems” of meaning and “systems” of knowledge that maintain power. In the clearest parallel Flood (2001: 141) writes:

*...if people experience unfairness in chosen actions, then there may be a need to do one or both of the following. Steps might be taken to emancipate privileged people from their ideologies and power structures that lead to unfair treatment for less privileged people. Also, steps might be taken to unshackle underprivileged people from dominant ideologies and power structures.*³⁷

While critical futures studies focuses strongly on problematizing existing systems of meaning, knowledge and structure as they relate to power within society and specifically as it relates to the determination of the future, TSI takes a similar approach into a organizational or communal environment, challenging local “systems” at various levels. Hence, the critical futures studies and TSI share intimate interests, and more work could be done to see how these two approaches could find synergy.

Futures studies has much to learn from action research in this domain. Futures studies has relied on “sage on stage” style futurists in many instances overpowering audiences and groups with knowledge and models

about the future. In many cases futurists work for huge corporations helping these companies colonise the future. In other cases futurists become policy makers for government, setting agendas for years to come, locking out grassroots debate on pathways through an overpowering discourse. Finally, in some cases futures studies experts need to be let into policy making, long controlled by planning and economics, for their capacity to generate intelligent and meaningful alternatives.

Social Innovation

Action research as a method for fostering social innovation is well documented. Examples such as the Grameen Bank micro-lending program in Bangladesh, created through a local action research program, abound. Likewise, futures work such as Robert Jungk and Norbert Mullert's Future Workshops (1987) see social innovation as a central priority in futures studies, as a way of democratising the future, opening alternative futures through diverse creative participation.³⁸ Slaughter (2001) also sees social innovation as a primary futures studies domain, in its capacity for deep design, to re-conceptualise social reality in fundamental ways.³⁹

Foresight is central to innovation in that it gives meaning to many innovations, (sustainable innovation for example) that ordinarily would not be meaningful if lacking a temporal element. Foresight not only offers a need and rationale for innovation through its exploration of time and creation of temporal distance, but allows for the exploration of this distance in rigorous ways, and the testing of innovations in these futures scenarios. Strategic innovation in both the technical and social domain requires foresight.

Action research gives futures studies a powerful method of creating social innovations with futures relevance. It can allow futures studies to be more than speculation about the future, but a way of re-constructing futures in deep ways through social innovation. In contrast, futures studies gives action research knowledge that would give their process, (already known for generating meaningful social innovations) enhanced futures relevance, meaningfulness in the context of alternative futures.

Synthesis

Unsurprisingly there are already many concrete example of the integration of the two disciplines. Futures professionals, in some instances, have intuitively been doing action learning, perhaps without the heavy

emphasis on documentation and review that action research requires. Likewise, some in action research seem to have used some foresight methods to further their research and ability to create meaningful action.

The search conference is a concrete example of a successful integration. In Future Search, a type of search conference developed by Janoff & Weiss (1995), participants are asked to bring news clippings of what might be emerging issues that could affect community stakeholders. Based on this initial base, the group together begins creating a time line that forks into ideal and probable futures. This divergence then becomes the basis for creating a group vision for the community and creating meaningful action.⁴⁰ In the Herbst Dual Track Search Conference, participants begin by examining the positive and negative changes that have been taking place in the community from past to present. They then move on to looking at what changes are expected in the future in both positive and negative form. This then becomes the basis for formulating key problems faced by the community, and the action steps that are needed. This process of looking at historical trends and extrapolating them outwards is really classic futures studies, something which futurists have done for decades (Greenwood & Levin 1998: 163).⁴¹ Opening this up as a participatory process is where action research comes into play.

A group of futurists from Australia have for many years been incorporating action research into futures work. Tony Stevenson, Sohail Inayatullah, Robert Burke, Paul Wildman and others have for many years been developing Anticipatory Action Learning, a form of foresight work done in an action learning setting. Tony Stevenson (2002), former president of the World Futures Studies Federation writes:

*Anticipatory action learning seeks to link inquiry, anticipation, and learning with decisions, actions and evaluation, during an openly democratic process....It integrates research/search with decision and action, and down-grades the prerogative of a research elite, empowering all participants.*⁴²

Sohail Inayatullah (2002: 18) has for many years developed Anticipatory Action Learning as pedagogy in teaching foresight to students and professionals. He considers action research as the fourth and most recent epistemological advance in foresight work, after the predictive (assumes that the universe is deterministic), interpretive (assumes the "universe" is contextually given), and critical (assumes the present is the "victory of one particular discourse").⁴³ At the University of Sunshine Coast, in

Brisbane, he advises post-graduate students using this framework. He (2002) writes:

In anticipatory action learning, the key is to develop probable, possible and preferred estimations of the future based on the categories of stakeholders. The future is constructed through deep participation. Content learning gives way to process learning. The future thus becomes owned by those having interests in that future. Moreover, there is no perfect forecast or vision. The future is continuously revisited, questioned.⁴⁴

Finally, a Master degree in Anticipatory Action Learning has recently been created by Robert Burke and others at the International Management Centre and University of Action Learning (Australian Foresight Institute 2002):

The programs take a holistic approach focusing on community futures, ecological literacy, and eco-centric leadership – creating a new model of inclusiveness for the facilitation of a community and organisational re-invention of itself.⁴⁵

Conclusion

I hope that I have show so far that not only are the aims in both fields in alignment in various ways, but the approach to work in both fields parallels in other instances, and that in some cases the methods are indeed the same.

While action research tends toward local context, and futures studies tends toward global context, action research has been used within global communities, and futures studies with local communities. Indeed, it is the complexity and potential within both fields that makes integrating the two in a meaningful way challenging. The complementarity to the respective disciplines is hard to ignore, and this project promises to be a rewarding endeavor, with many already having been at work in this social innovation for years. For me, it is a question of creating communities of foresight and the democratisation of grass-roots futures. Can action research help enable futures studies to more enable individuals to take responsibility for their society's future? Can anticipatory action learning be the next paradigm for foresight?

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